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Yoko Ono: I Still Fear John's Killer

Tim Teeman

20–26 minutes

Outside of the Dakota, one of the most famous apartment buildings in the world, tourists stand in the warm Manhattan sunshine and gaze up.

Strawberry Fields is nearby—a little, hippy-vibed Central Park memorial, overseen in its creation in 1985 by Yoko Ono, John Lennon's widow. The musician was shot dead, aged 40, outside the Dakota in December 1980 by Mark David Chapman, and Ono still lives here in the same apartment they shared.

Like the building she occupies, Ono has a perpetual air of mystery: To many, she will always be the villainous interloper—the woman "who broke up the Beatles."

Age has mellowed the public view of her. Now 82, she is still known for performance art, and for just being "Yoko Ono," smiling enigmatically behind dark glasses, dedicated keeper of the Lennon flame, and social activist. She manages to be both dainty and imposing, her mischievous, steely smile set against the world.

Ono's thoughts about her two great passions—the environment and peace—as well as her more esoteric pursuits and beliefs are visible to her 4.75 million Twitter followers.

> The sky is not only above our heads. It extends all the way

> down to earth. When we raise a foot from the ground, we are walking in the sky.
>
> — Yoko Ono (@yokoono) October 11, 2015

Once past the Dakota's discreet, firm security, the visitor feels as if they are in a mysterious, stone-cushioned cocoon. Ono's upper-floor apartment is warrenous, a collection of model cats with illuminated eyes standing sentry inside the front door.

When Ono appears, dressed in a black shirt and slacks, sunglasses perched on the end of her nose, she states firmly in her broken Japanese-English, "Hello, so we'll go to the kitchen."

She is smiling warmly, but it is a command: The tone reminds me how Ono had ended a performance at MoMA the weekend before with a smile and firm "And that is it." We were dismissed. You sense Ono rigorously sets her own boundaries. She speaks measuredly. She is not effusive, dramatic, or grandstanding.

We walk past a huge table of hats and sunglasses, her two most famous accessories (and laid out for convenience's sake, with all the touring she does), into a large, homely kitchen: Notable are pictures of Lennon, and Ono and Lennon.

She remembers buying her first pair of sunglasses, with Lennon, one day at Saks Fifth Avenue, taking a break from the recording studio. They provide a barrier between Ono and the world. "The word privacy comes to me," said Ono, "like the arm's-length relationship I can have with people."

Does Ono still like living in the Dakota? Lennon was shot outside—some might say it's the last place she would want to live.

She launches into a tale of how she and Lennon ended up living here.

They were living in the St. Regis hotel in Beverly Hills at the time, and “hotel living was so unattractive.”

The actor Jack Palance suggested they try the Dakota, and so another day, while sunbathing beside the St. Regis pool (as you do), Ono said to Lennon, “We should do this.”

Ono instructed one of their assistants to go to the Dakota to see if an apartment was free, and one was set to be listed the very next day—this very apartment we’re sitting in.

After Lennon was killed, did Ono ever think about moving?

“Never. We shared this every day. Every day we shared each room. I wouldn’t do that.”

So it isn’t a tragic place?

“The good memory supersedes the bad memory. The bad memory was just one that was terrible. But other than that, I felt we were still together. I would feel very strange if I had to leave this apartment. There are so many things that he touched here that he loved. Those things mean a lot.”

And the public attention isn’t so strange, she says. When she and Lennon did their famous Bed-In for Peace in 1969, there were people click-clicking their cameras all the time.

You get used to it, Ono says equably. “When I walk out in Central Park it gets too much because they start to get physical… if they didn’t get physical I think I would just ignore it.” But, she laughs, “I have to walk somewhere. I sort of cast my eyes down a lot.”

She’s very proud of overseeing the creation of Strawberry Fields, and scoffs at those who originally opposed it, claiming it would be “a drugs’ den,” as she puts it.

“Can you imagine anyone being against Strawberry Fields?” Ono says with a smile. She still walks through it, as discreetly as she can. “I am so glad because a lot of people love it and use it.”

What drugs did she and Lennon themselves use? “I hate marijuana. I never wanted to—but in a social situation with people passing it round you just have to pretend.”

And now, no drugs? “No.”

She says she is aiming to “detoxify” herself to make herself as healthy as possible.

“Detoxify” from what, I wonder: She looks fantastic. Ono says that she took “a lot of drugs” in the 1960s, and in the 1970s there were a “few incidents” as she puts it. She doesn’t drink now, but she has smoked a lot, she says.

“I didn’t like marijuana, so I didn’t constantly take it like most people. I think acid was not bad, but acid is very strong so you don’t take it every day.”

She stopped taking drugs in “maybe 1981 or ’82. After John’s passing, the doctors said, ‘We’ll give you morphine, every day if you want to.’ When you are in extreme sadness, you don’t know what they will do—jump out from the side of a building or something.”

Is she talking about another assassin?

“What happened was that I suddenly realized I had extra responsibility on many levels, so I couldn’t be taking anything. The first night they gave me morphine, but from then on I didn’t take anything. I couldn’t do it. I had to be super-clear to take on the business situation, the political situation, everything. And then I think I took some drugs, sort of like designer drugs or

something."

Whoever gave them to her said they would make her happy. "It wasn't very good and I just didn't feel right."

I ask if she was really worried that somebody would shoot her, after Lennon's assassination.

"I was concerned, yes. At the time, they could have done it, too. I was really lucky that I didn't die with John. If that had happened, what would have happened to [their son] Sean?"

How does Ono feel about the possibility of Chapman being released? He was denied parole last year for the eighth time, and his wife Gloria told the *Daily Mail* the couple had written to Ono seeking forgiveness.

"I'm super-careful, almost like a certain animal who is used to being hunted, like a deer," says Ono, who employs personal security. "So when I go out or when I don't go out, in my apartment, I'm very, very careful. It's very, very difficult for me to think about Chapman, especially because he doesn't seem to think that was a bad thing to do. It's crazy."

Ono has opposed every single one of Chapman's bids for parole. On her husband's killer's possible future freedom, Ono says, "One thing I think is that he did it once, he could do it again, to somebody else—you know. It could be me, it could be Sean, it could be anybody, so there is that concern."

Does Ono still feel Chapman represents a threat to her safety?

"Yeah. I would be concerned. I said he's crazy, but probably not—probably he had a purpose he wanted to accomplish like 'Kill John Lennon.' So he might have another purpose. He's not the kind of person who's… I don't think he's just doing it emotionally. There is a reason, whether a simple reason or not, to do what

he does, and justify it. So that's very scary."

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The week before we met, I watched Ono sing and bellow into a microphone at a performance at the Museum of Modern Art as old home movie footage of her parents played behind her.

MoMA had been hosting a survey of her 1960s artworks—including an all-white chess set, and films of her performances like "Cut Piece," first performed in 1964, in which gallery-goers cut away shreds of Ono's clothing. Next, Ono will next take the MoMA exhibition to Tokyo, Beijing, and Lyon.

Ono is also set to receive one of the "Icon" awards at the Attitude Awards in the U.K. on October 14, in recognition of her art, of being an outsider, of doing things defiantly her own way, and of supporting LGBT people—most vocally in her 2004 song "Everyman… Everywoman," which she produced in support of same-sex relationships and marriage and which is a revision of a song she sang with Lennon, "Every Man Has a Woman Who Loves Him."

"I think it's great," Ono says of the Icon award. "I get a few awards in different places. This means a lot to me because I have been working for such a long time trying to create a more open situation."

The existence of prejudice is "incredible," she says, and marriage equality is "really great, we shouldn't be so thankful. It's just normal."

Prejudice, she thinks, "goes both ways, I'm sure gays feel straights are really dumb. There's more freedom being gay probably, that's good."

LGBTs should have true equality, Ono says, "and you'll get it.

Equality is people having to create their own future. That's what they're [gay people] doing. They should be very, very positive."

"Equality under the law and equality in real life is slightly different," says Ono. "People are different from how the law can control them. We have a very complex life called the human life. There's more than equality in life."

Is Ono proud to receive the Icon award? “Well, as much as the other awards I have received,” she says evenly, “but probably especially this one. There was a closeness I felt to gay people. We both suffered a lot for being different.”

When I ask about her sexuality, Ono laughs. “I think my sexuality is extremely old-fashioned. Many people think I’m a strong woman. I never thought that, but probably I am. Maybe they think I really don’t go for men, but it’s not true. I like normal relationships”—she catches herself—“whatever ‘a normal relationship’ is.”

I ask if she has ever had sex with a woman, or been attracted to them.

“Well, that’s another thing. John and I had a big talk about it, saying, basically, all of us must be bisexual. And we were sort of in a situation of thinking that we’re not [bisexual] because of society. So we are hiding the other side of ourselves, which is less acceptable. But I don’t have a strong sexual desire towards another woman.”

Have you ever? “Not really, not sexually.”

One online satire imagined an affair between Ono and Hillary Clinton.

“It’s great,” Ono laughs. “I mean, both John and I thought it was good that people think we were bisexual, or homosexual.” She laughs again.

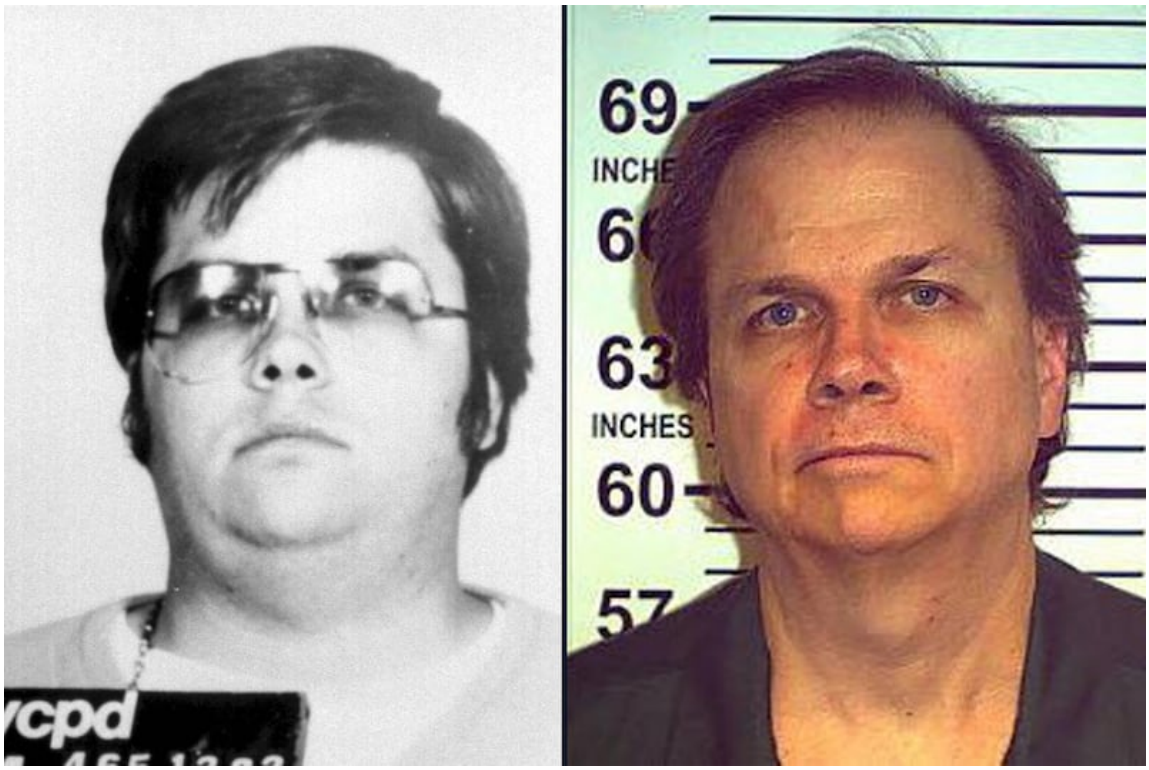
What about that old rumor that Lennon had sex with Beatles manager Brian Epstein (which was also the subject of the 1991 film, *The Hours and The Times*)?

Lennon himself said: “Well, it was almost a love affair, but not quite. It was never consummated. But it was a pretty intense relationship.” Later, Lennon’s friend Pete Shotton said Lennon had told him that he had allowed Epstein to “toss [wank] him off.”

“Uh, well, the story I was told was a very explicit story, and from that I think they didn’t have it [sex],” Ono tells me. “But they went to Spain, and when they came back, tons of reporters were asking, ‘Did you do it, did you do it?’ So he said, ‘I did it.’ Isn’t that amazing? But of course he would say that. I’m sure Brian Epstein made a move, yeah.”

And Lennon said no to Epstein?

“He just didn’t want to do it, I think.”



Did Lennon have sex with other men?

“I think he had a desire to, but I think he was too inhibited,” says Ono.

“No, not inhibited. He said, ‘I don’t mind if there’s an incredibly attractive guy.’ It’s very difficult: They would have to be not just

physically attractive, but mentally very advanced too. And you can't find people like that."

So did Lennon ever have sex with men?

"No, I don't think so," says Ono. "The beginning of the year he was killed, he said to me, 'I could have done it, but I can't because I just never found somebody that was that attractive.' Both John and I were into attractiveness—you know—beauty."

I ask what she makes of the people outside the building, the crowds still at Strawberry Fields.

Ono misunderstands, or mishears (or is simply focused on the last strand of our conversation), and continues to talk about sex.

"I don't make anything out of it. When you're not really interested in that sort of sex, you don't think about it. Both John and I surprisingly were very passive people. Unless somebody made a thing out of it, if they made a move, I wouldn't even think about it."

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The Attitude award seems especially apposite given the prejudice Ono herself has faced.

"Very heavy prejudice for being Asian, for being another race, and for being a woman," she says. The sexism she faced was not as severe as the racism, she adds.

"One of the reasons I survived—I am surviving, aren't I? (she laughs lightly)—is that I didn't take it that seriously."

As a younger woman, Ono recalls finding an apartment and being turned down in person. She called the agent later, and was told it was still available.

"I had my life," Ono says, when I ask how she faced racism,

“which is to say, to make good art and good music, and I was very proud of it. Anything else wasn’t that serious. More serious was my parents, who had a different idea about what I should be making. I was too avant-garde probably. I feel that they were embarrassed.”

Ono’s father, Eisuke, a banker, “couldn’t stand” the idea of her being born, because it would mean a loss of freedom.

He went to San Francisco before her birth in Tokyo—“That’s

when I lost my father the first time." Even when Ono grew older —the family moved to the U.S., then Japan, then back to the U.S.—there was still a distance between them.

"In some ways I am different [from] them," she says, "because I try to have a warm relationship with my son [Sean] and my daughter [Kyoko]." (She and Kyoko were separated for 27 years after her ex-husband, Anthony Cox, kidnapped the girl.)

But Ono says she is also similar to her parents. Eisuke was a pianist, and her mother, Isoko, an artist. They were "surprised" by their daughter's pursuits. "I think they would have loved it if I had become a classical musician and composer. They were very polite about it. Neither of them came to my shows. That's how they expressed their feelings."

Her parents, she says, were also misunderstood: "They were too cultured for other people to understand them. They didn't mind it. They said, 'You go through all sorts of experiences, think of them as a play. Be objective about it, instead of getting upset.'"

Ono also faced prejudice around being with Lennon (they met at one of her shows)—a toxic mix of racism and the suspicion of her influence.

"I don't know why I deserved so many different kinds of prejudices," says Ono. "It was really a good relationship. Everything else around us was terribly bad. A lot of things John and I did naturally, instead of saying, 'Let's teach them.' Being ourselves did affect people."

Lennon was a keen feminist, Ono insists, beginning with being their son Sean's primary caretaker.

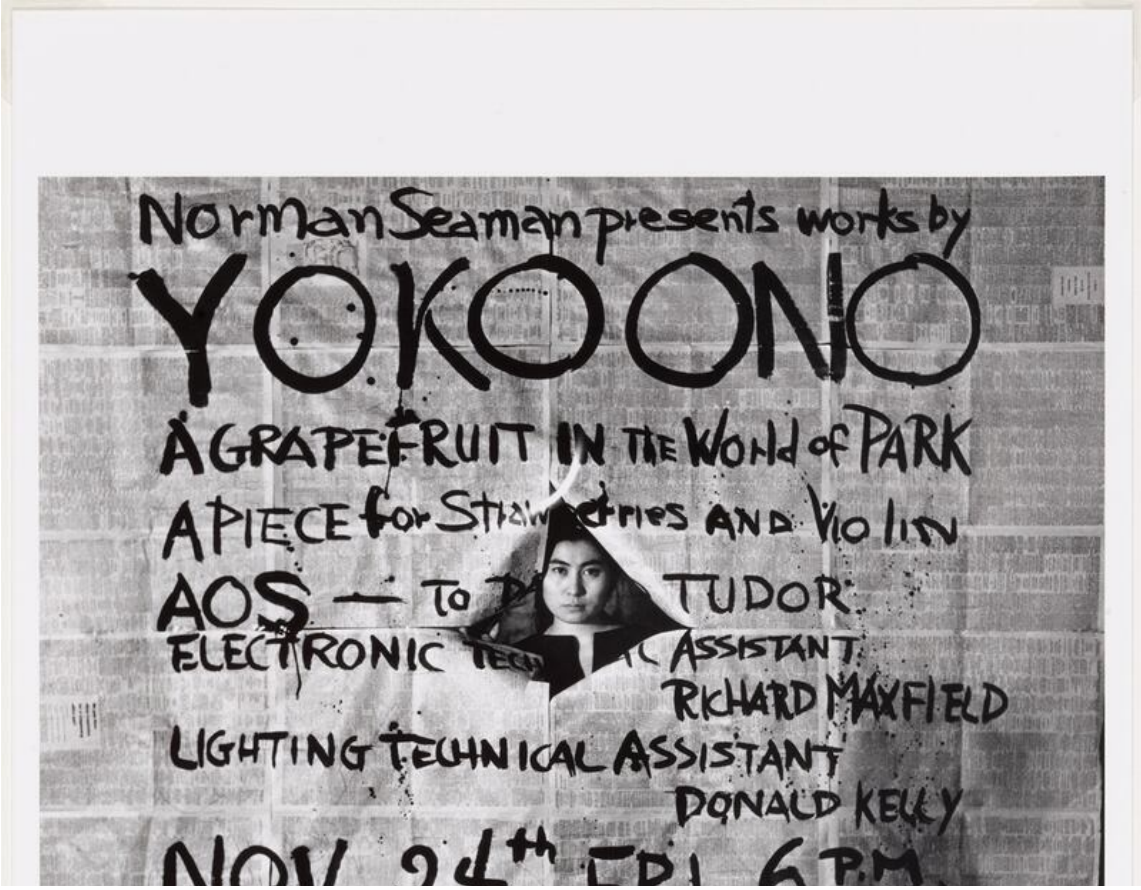
"He felt I knew more about business, which was not true. So he

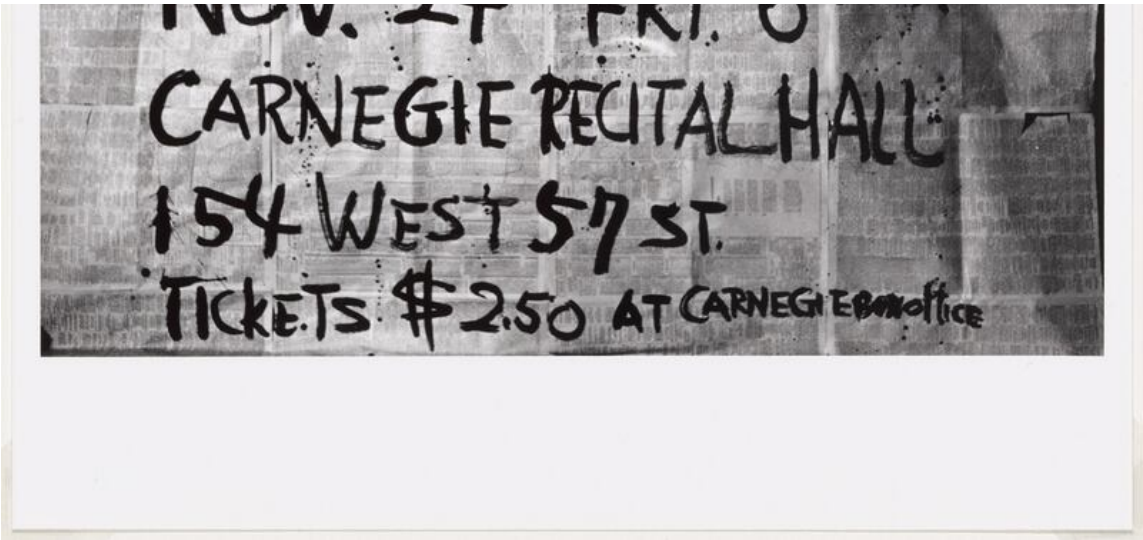
wanted me to take care of the business and he wanted to take care of the child, which was an incredible thing. In those days nobody did that. It was a macho age. And he cooked: He baked bread."

Still, she was hated for being the woman "who broke up the Beatles."

"One of the reasons that those things didn't hurt me was because I had a totally different life." She pauses. "It was not exactly fruitful. There were so many negative labels about me, but they were from people who really didn't understand me at all. If I were to come out and say something it wouldn't have affected anything. They would have laughed. So I shut up."

Ono and Paul McCartney have had a long, checkered relationship. Tensions seemed to ease between them, but then —in August's *Esquire*—McCartney bemoaned that the glory of the Beatles had been, since John's death, centered around Lennon.





McCartney told *Esquire*: “Yoko would appear in the press, and I’d read it, and it said ‘Paul did nothing! All he did was book the studio…’ Like, ‘Fuck you, darling! Hang on! All I did was book the fucking studio?’ Well, OK, now people know that’s not true. But that was just part of it. There was a lot of revisionism: John did this, John did that. I mean, if you just pull out all his great stuff and then stack it up against my not-so-great stuff, it’s an easy case to make.”

Ono was surprised to read that, particularly as she and McCartney had just been together at a dinner, seated at the same table, “talking about good things.”

Does she feel close to McCartney?

“I think it’s a very strange situation. We were kind of like stuck with a situation for 30 or 40 years, so we understand each other —let’s put it that way. What he said in *Esquire*, I think he’s really right.”

“I mean, he must have suffered a lot, just like I suffered more or less the same thing in a way. So I understand. I’m sympathetic to him for having all sorts of pain. Most people think that Paul or me should not have any pain at all because we are so privileged. But it’s not true. The degree of pain is always there.”

Does she feel they need to forgive each other in some way?

“No, no. We had to come to terms with the past in some way. Both of us are pretty self-sufficient in that sense.”

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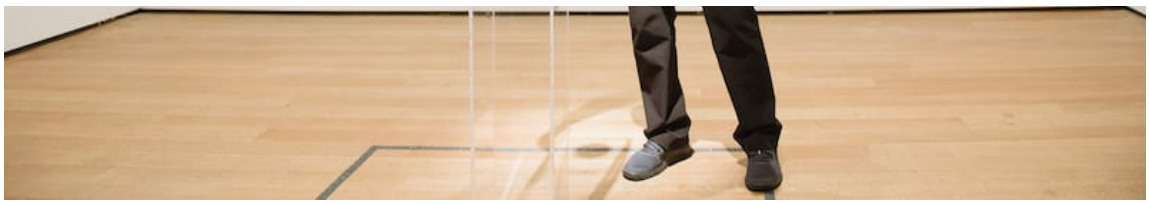
There have been “a few” men in Ono’s life since Lennon’s death, most famously her onetime boyfriend, the gallerist and painter Sam Havadtoy. “I wasn’t hiding. That was very important for me to have somebody around protecting me.”

Now she is single. “I love it. I got married three times [to composer Toshi Ichiyanagi from 1956 to 1962, then Cox from 1962 to 1969, and Lennon from 1969 to 1980]. The third one was extremely good and I just wanted that one to last, but it didn’t. I was always with somebody. Now this is the first time I’m not and it’s very good.”

She smiles. “I don’t have to think about the other person, like, ‘What would you like for lunch today?’ being concerned about the other party—and I don’t have the time to. I think I was given this freedom because I have so much to do.”

Her occupations are both an activist, “trying to do some good for the world,” and taking care of Lennon’s legacy; the latter “was terribly complicated but now it’s simmering down.”



Perhaps she is at least partly referring to the dispute she had with Julian Lennon, Lennon's son by Cynthia Lennon, who sued Lennon's estate after his father excluded him from his original will. Julian received a reported £20 million in a 1996 settlement agreement.

Ono thinks she has been a good parent to her children, Sean and Kyoko, "in the sense that all parents should not be too into their children's lives. I'm pretty hands-off. The fact that Sean and I especially understand each other musically and everything, it's a good relationship in that sense."

She adds that she likes Julian a lot: "He's intelligent and sensitive. He's had a terrible time actually. And also, just like Sean, having a huge daddy didn't help really."

Unsurprisingly, and admirably, Ono does not care if you don't understand her, or laugh at her tweeting esoteric thoughts such as "Let's report to the Universe how glad we are that our planet is part of the most beautiful Universe," and "Remember, we are all water in the same ocean."

"It's great if I can make people laugh," she tells me. "That's just fine. It doesn't touch my core. I believe in life. The self is growing in us constantly and also protecting us." Onstage, "I just want the sound to be perfect and good."

Ono is true to herself—as offbeat and unconventional, unyieldingly so, as that self might be. She has always refused to play by anyone's rules but her own, or to compromise or make nice to make her own life, and public perception of her, smoother.

Despite all the criticism, mockery, derision, and worse thrown at her, Ono has simply carried on creating the art that matters to her, speaking out on issues that matter to her, and generally pursuing her own passions and path.

Ono says, “There are certain things you can correct by being an activist, but other than that one needs to protect oneself and maintain one’s yin and yang, and be meditative all the time.”

She “really doesn’t believe” in institutional politics. “I feel sorry for politicians. To get the vote they have to do all sorts of things.”

Ono is not as excited about the idea of a Hillary Clinton presidency; the possibility of the first female president is “a symbolic thing. A president has to be a good person for the president, not because they are female or male.”

As for pop music today, Ono doesn’t “particularly make a point of listening to it, but it’s all around.” She prefers old gypsy music. “I have an incredible respect for art. It’s amazing that I do because I am an artist and most artists will have kind of an apologetic attitude about their work. I don’t. I really think that everything we do as artists is helping the world.”

I ask if she considers her mortality.

“Yes, just as anyone else who would think about it. It’s possible that I will suddenly be surprised by dying, but I’m counting on the fact that it’s going to be a long life.”

She lives alone and seems very self-contained: Is she lonely?

“I think most famous people are lonely because they are separate. They have a separate life—whatever that is—from people around them. Even when you’re with them there’s a certain separation. It’s something you don’t create. It just happens in your life, and you either accept it or don’t.”

And she has?

“I totally accept it.”

It is time to go. “So I will say goodbye here,” Yoko Ono says abruptly as we approach the doorway of her kitchen, other rooms in tantalizing shadow. She is smiling her warm, mischievous smile. It is one of the politest—and most emphatic—orders to scram I have ever received.